

## **Post-WHCOA Event Summary Report**

**Name of the Event:** American Foundation for the Blind Pre-White House Conference on Aging and Vision

**Date of event:** March 12, 2005

**Location of the event:** Long Wharf Marriott Hotel, Boston, MA

**Number of Persons Attending:** 80 people including 15 older consumers with visual impairments and 4 with hearing and vision impairments.

**Sponsoring Organization:** American Foundation for the Blind

**Contact Name:** Alberta L. Orr

**Phone:** 212 502 7634

**e-mail:** [alorr@afb.net](mailto:alorr@afb.net)

### **Priority Issue #1: Access to Assistive Technology and Increasing Universal Design in the Marketplace.**

Universal design is the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design. Within the marketplace, a major access concern is the usability of technology and appliances for older people, and especially those experiencing sensory impairments such as vision loss, hearing loss, and combined vision and hearing loss.

#### **Barriers:**

- lack of input from older consumers, and especially those with sensory losses, in the research, design, and development of products interferes with the essence of universal design.
- modern design, such as multifunctional and touch screen home appliances makes the operation of these appliances very difficult for older adults, and almost impossible for those experiencing vision, hearing, and tactile losses due to the aging process.
- standard packaging, such as: child proof lids and small print size of labels and instructions on prescription and over-the-counter medications, put seniors at a great health risk because they may be unable to identify the medication and may be unable to read and understand the directions for taking the medications.
- resource information on assistive technology and products that utilize universal design that would assist older adults in maintaining their independence is not available.
- lack of consistency in universal design in products such as: remote controls; thermostats; telephones; ATMs – etc. makes it difficult for older adults especially those with vision loss to utilize these products.

#### **Proposed Solutions:**

- create tax incentives for manufacturers and educational incentives for the design, development and manufacture of universally designed products that have included input from the senior market including those with disabilities
- develop a “Senior Seal of Approval” based on guidelines from the senior consumer market.

- require FDA to use a minimum of 12 point font for prescription labels and directions.
- create a national resource and information and referral center with toll free telephone/tty number, and web access to connect seniors with assistive technology and universally designed products that meet the “Senior Seal of Approval”.
- develop and enforce standards for universal design of appliances and products that are senior friendly and can be stamped with the “Senior Seal of Approval”.

### **Recommendations to the Policy Committee:**

For older adults, and especially those with sensory losses, assistive technology and universal design can be used to make the environment safer, more accessible, enhance independence and employment, and improve quality of life. Because our population is aging and diverse, and many seniors wish to live in a least restrictive environment, we therefore submit the following recommendations to guide universal design:

- Establish tax incentives to manufacturers who have the “Senior Seal of Approval” on their product by meeting the following criteria: consumer input during research and development phase; consumer testing; utilization and application of concepts and characteristics embodied in existing federal environmental and design access standards, specifically including seniors with sensory impairments.
- Establish general economic incentives to product design training programs that target commodities useful to seniors, to include such things as appliances and consumer electronics, pharmaceuticals, and telecommunications. Examples include: tuition/loan reimbursement, scholarships, and graduate assistantships.
- Establish a nationwide Information and Referral Center on “senior friendly” technology meeting the “Senior Seal of Approval”. The Center must be accessible by a toll free telephone/TTY number; computer website; and provision of written information in standard print, large print, and Braille.

### **Priority Issue #2: Access to Usable Public Transportation to Serve the Mobility Needs of Older Americans, Including Those with Sensory Loss**

The demographic changes often referred to as “the aging of America” are now occurring. These changes greatly impact retirement income, health care, and services; however, accessing affordable, usable public transportation overrides these issues. Without transportation, older persons are unable to access the range of health care, community services, and independent living options they need. This is especially true for older individuals who lose vision as they age and who have to give up driving. Many feel that public transportation is inaccessible and too challenging. The same issues confront older Americans who cannot drive due to a range of other disabilities.

#### **Barriers:**

- lack of public or specialized Para transit services in cities, suburbs, and rural areas.

- continued use of the car as a primary mode of transportation; 90% of Americans over age 65 make all of their trips by car and the growth in the number of trips and mileage covered is steadily increasing (“The Mobility Needs of Older Americans,” Brookings Institute). Even older people experiencing age-related loss continue to use their car unsafely often for lack of options.
- patterns of family life today such as adult children living in different areas of the country due to divorce, employment, and lifestyle mean that informal support systems are not available to provide transportation to older persons.
- lack of consideration of transportation needs in retirement planning.

### **Proposed Solutions:**

- increase public education and outreach targeted to older Americans regarding the necessity to plan for the use of accessible public transportation in their retirement lives and become less dependent on the private car
- consider new funding formulas for public transportation services
- increase investment in conventional service as well as specialized transit, and improve transit services in targeted areas of high growth residence areas for retirees, and rural areas.

### **Recommendations to the Policy Committee**

Transportation affects all aspects of daily lives. Older individuals with disabilities are particularly affected since their options are even more limited than other older persons.

- Develop a public education campaign and materials for use by public transit authorities. Campaign materials should address the needs and concerns of older individuals who, because of age of onset, disability including sensory loss or lack of experience with public transit, may not regard even currently available transportation alternatives as safe, convenient, or reliable.
- Target campaign materials to organizations that currently supply retirement planning information such as corporate, union, and employee retirement assistance programs. Include information that will help persons planning to retire to analyze their projected transportation needs and the community potential for providing public transportation alternatives to meet these needs.
- Recommend that federal, state, and municipal policies and programs finance four major categories for accessible and usable transportation: improving conventional service, increasing safety and security, making communication and information accessible to individuals with sensory loss and provide additional services targeted to older individuals with disabilities including vision and hearing loss.
- Explore new funding formulas within existing or new authorities that might base allocations on the numbers of older individuals within census areas. This would reduce inequities in public transit funding for rural and suburban areas with higher concentrations of older individuals with more need for transit alternatives.

### **Priority Issue # 3: Access to Information and Services**

The vast majority of people age 65 and older with visual and/or hearing loss are unaware of services and devices that could help them to improve the quality of their lives. The need for this information will increase as the number of Americans who are at greatest risk, those age 55 and older, is projected to double over the next 30 years. While government agencies and voluntary organizations may have resources to help people with visual and/or hearing impairment, these resources are not known by most of the public as well as many professionals. Consumers who are visually impaired now have no easy way to access information and services, particularly vision and hearing-related services in their communities.

#### **Barriers:**

- lack of knowledge by older adults, family, friends, and caregivers about the types of services available and where to locate services.
- lack of a systematic referral process within the service delivery system of services for the older adults with vision/hearing loss.
- funding limitations for adaptive devices and specialized services for older adults with vision/hearing loss.
- lack of awareness of vision and hearing rehabilitation services among by professionals, including ophthalmologists and other physicians, resulting in extremely low referral rates to rehabilitation services.

#### **Proposed Solutions:**

- incorporate vision rehabilitation education within professional preparation training programs across many disciplines for service providers of the older adults, including physicians and other health care professionals.
- increase public education efforts that describe and provide information on the benefits of vision rehabilitation services. Take advantage of existing efforts within professional organizations.
- make information and education materials easily and readily accessible in appropriate formats, such as large print, for older adults.

#### **Recommendation to the Policy Committee**

Educate professionals in the health care and social service fields about rehabilitation services related to vision and hearing loss so that these professionals can become effective referral sources and older people experiencing sensory loss can make informed decisions and have greater access to services in a timely manner, thus maximizing their ability to continue to function independently and age in place.

## **Priority Issue # 4: Employment**

Most jobs in today's market require computer knowledge and skills. Many older persons lack the self-confidence, skills and appropriate assistive technology to compete. Older persons, particularly those with sensory impairments, are often victims of the digital divide, lack of equitable and meaningful access to technology that would enable them to maintain or obtain employment.

### **Barriers:**

- lack of computer knowledge and training limits older persons in retaining or obtaining employment.
- lack of availability of assistive technology hinders older persons with health issues and disabilities from being able to compete in the job market.
- negative attitudes on the part of employers, employment counselors, and older persons themselves results in disenfranchising older persons from the workforce; older persons with disabilities are even more adversely affected.

### **Proposed Solutions:**

- provide opportunities for computer literacy for all older persons.
- make assistive technology training available for older persons who need it to utilize a computer effectively.
- offer incentives to employers to hire older persons, including those with sensory loss and provide them with needed accommodations.
- develop public education messages about the importance and value of older workers in the workplace.

### **Recommendations to the Policy Committee:**

Older persons need jobs to maintain economic security and self-esteem. In return, they generally have a good work ethic and are responsible employees. With the advent of technology, work options are more limited for older persons. Addressing this situation is critical particularly with the current generation of older persons who have not had training in the use of computers and related technology. Furthermore, those with disabilities such as visual and/or hearing impairments (a number expected to double by 2030) can function well with appropriate assistive technology and training. Therefore we recommend the following:

- Establish grants and/or tax incentives to employers to provide training and appropriate technology to enable older persons, especially those with sensory impairments, to maintain/obtain skill sets needed to participate in gainful employment.
- Couple these incentives with a public education campaign on the importance and value of older workers.